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Teaching about Neoliberalism and Education De/reforms in Teacher Education Courses: My Journey to Oz

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Abstract

Few pre-and in-service teachers understand the various educational laws and policies currently at work in our schools (e.g. charters, vouchers, etc.). How can these concepts be taught in a one-semester course with students who have minimal prior knowledge and are saturated with neoliberal discourse which tells them that choice and the quest for one's own private good are the best we can hope for in education reform? And how are teacher educators to teach their students in ways that do not indoctrinate them with a simplistic counter-message to the neoliberal discourse? This article details an action research study by a teacher educator in which she attempts to answer these questions.

Introduction

Charters, vouchers, quasi-vouchers, supplemental education services, merit pay for teachers, alternative/shortcut routes to teacher licensure, scripted curricula and pacing guides, open enrollment, tuition tax credits, oh my!! Images of Dorothy, and the Scarecrow, Tinman, and Lion treading quietly and carefully through the dark woods conjure in my mind as I think about developing lesson plans on all the various education de/reforms that seem to be growing ever more dominant these days.

I teach foundations of education to graduate and undergraduate pre- and in-service teachers at a comprehensive public university in Virginia. My students typically either come from suburban northern Virginia locales or are more local to our rural southwestern Virginia region. Most are white, female, and solidly middle class. About one third of our students are first-generation college attendees. Our students generally have a B average in high school with average SAT scores. More often than not, my students come to my courses (which give them an overview of the history, philosophies, sociology, psychology, economics, and policies and practices of the American education system – all taught through an equity-orientation lens) with very minimal sophisticated understanding of the ways in which powerful groups in our society use educational policy to privilege certain populations over others. For example, many are firm believers in the

myth of meritocracy and argue that hard work will almost always lead to success in life. Very seldom do they begin my classes with an in-depth understanding of the “invisible knapsack” (McIntosh, 1989) many of them carry that is filled with cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973) based upon social class, race, and gender. Additionally, very few of my students, even those who already teach in the public schools, have a deep understanding of the ins and outs of various educational laws and policies that are currently at work in our schools. In addition to these issues, I also only have the students in my courses for one 14-week semester, a short blip in the students’ overall plan of study.

When I first began teaching these classes over twelve years ago, NCLB was just in its infancy, and many of the de/reforms I mentioned above were not as dominant as they have become over the past five years or so. As they have grown in size and number, and as NCLB gave way, in part, to the Obama administration’s *Race to the Top* and NCLB waiver requirements, I have found a need to better explore with my students the types of environments in which they may find themselves working as public school teachers and the challenges, in the form of new types of tax-funded resource distribution, they may face. Part of me has wished to cower in a metaphorical cyclone cellar and avoid the twisting and intertwining complexities of these new realities for public education, but as a teacher educator, I knew I had the responsibility to make sure our future K-12 educators have the brains, heart, and courage to understand these challenges to high quality, equitable public education.

Purpose of the Study and Methodology

So, what is a professor to do in such a short time frame with students who have minimal prior knowledge and who are saturated with neoliberal discourse (from a multitude of sources, including both Democratic and Republican politicians) which tells them that choice and the quest for one’s own private good are the best we can possibly hope for in education reform? And how is this professor to teach her students in ways that do not merely indoctrinate them with a simplistic counter-message to the neoliberal discourse? Going down this “yellow brick road” and answering these questions became the purpose of this recursive action research project. In the quest to answer these questions, I have followed Susman’s (1983) five phases of action research.

1. I identified a problem and
2. sought more information to truly understand the problem.
3. I postulated several possible solutions/teaching activities and
4. tried them out. As I tried these out, I
5. observed student reactions as well as the quality of their work and understandings.

Based upon these observations, I started back at phase 1 to try to refine my teaching even more.

I went through three rounds of the above phases, and this article details the iterative process and its results.

Round 1

Phase 1 — Identification of Problem

As discussed above, part of teaching my foundations of education courses involves helping my students understand current educational practices and policies. My students will be entering public schools in this era of accountability and emergence of new types of reform policies that reflect neoliberal values (Glass, 2008). Thus, the first problem that I defined was how was I to help my students develop awareness of all the educational policies at hand at the given moment? Because my foundations courses are, in essence, survey courses about American education, I thought at first that one or two weeks of class time would be ample enough to explore the various neoliberal education reforms that have been introduced in the past decade or so.

Phases 2-5 — Seeking More Information, Postulating Teaching Ideas, Trying Them, and Observing Effects

As mentioned above, I initially only planned to discuss these de/reforms as a discrete module within my classes for one or two weeks. My first attempts at teaching about these were really a sharing of simplistic explanations of each of the de/reforms; explanations based on research I had done on the ideas myself. I shared basic definitions, gave a few examples of where some of these reforms were happening, and shared resources on where they could find other information. For example, I used the Education Commission of the States' clickable map of the states which displays the charter laws specific for a given state; the Rethinking Schools publication *Keeping the Promise* (2008) to provide different stories about charter schools in various areas; blogs, such as Diane Ravitch's and Julian Vasquez Heilig's, which, with multiple posts each day, provide illustrations of all the variety of neoliberal de/reforms in various state education policies; and the Public Education Network's (PEN) weekly newsblasts to help keep students abreast of the wide variety of policies and policy implementation effects happening across the nation.

What I found after sharing this information was that my students were overwhelmed. To them, it seemed that all this information was an overabundance of disjointed facts. Additionally, in the past few years, these reforms have increased in number and been legislatively approved in more and more states. This increasing complexity caused my students to be confused about how each of these reforms were different, yet similar, as well as perplexed by the potential benefits and detriments of each. From my first attempts at just sharing information, I knew that I needed to spend more time parsing out the differences between the various de/reforms in order to truly give my students the tools they needed. So, back I went on the yellow brick road in my quest to better teach on this issue!

Round 2

Phase 1— Further Defining the Problem

The complexity of these reforms, coupled with the fact that many of my students lacked experience in critically evaluating our society's political, social, and economic systems, required me to develop lesson plans that would both explain the de/reforms taking place while simultaneously challenging and examining some of my students' most deeply-held beliefs about capitalism, choice, and democracy.

When I first began teaching about things like charter schools, vouchers, magnet schools, and open enrollment, I was struck by how often my students seemed to uncritically embrace these “choices” for families and overlook the facts that not everyone has equal opportunities to act on the supposed free choices offered through these de/reforms. For example, when first presented with the idea of charter schools, many of my students spoke highly of them as a concept, and ignored the barriers to their equitable availability to all (Glass, 2008; Ravitch, 2013). They seemed to be satisfied with the notion that the charters existed and some articulated the idea that “if only the educational consumers would exercise their choices properly, then all K-12 students would have access to a top-quality education.” I was somewhat shocked by this uncritical acceptance of these reforms, especially when I also shared information about how not everyone has equal access to educational choice opportunities (e.g. if a voucher program exists, not all children will be accepted by a private school of their choice; or if a charter school exists, not every parent can drive to pick up the application, nor read the application if he/she is illiterate or not an English speaker). At first, I was deeply troubled by what seemed, on the surface, to be a willful ignorance of the challenges that some people face in this world.

I needed to understand this issue better, so I turned to the literature on neoliberal educational reforms to help me understand what I was up against, what forces were acting on my students' understandings, and what their pre-conceptions were about education.

Phase 2 —Seeking More Information, Connecting to the Literature

Students' understanding of choice — neoliberal discourse permeates their ideas. To many Americans, choice is a hallmark of our society. In both our economic and political systems, we have a multitude of opportunities to express and act on our individual preferences. These are the liberties that define us and, as we are told by countless politicians, are what many other countries are anxious to have themselves. Students thus enter my education courses with a culturally-defined love of choices and an uncritical acceptance of the idea that having choices and acting on one's personal preferences alone is an unequivocal good. Within this frame, attempts at privatization and drawing parallels between business principles and education make a great deal of sense to my students; things like vouchers, charters, open enrollment, pay for performance, tuition tax credits, alternative routes to teacher licensure, and so on seem to only be further manifestations of the freedoms we hold so dear in our society. This neoliberal discourse has permeated the viewpoints of my students and I recognized that I needed to help students unpack these notions and recognize that implicit within these de/reforms are, in effect, assaults on the professionalism of teachers (Connell, 2009; Giroux, 1988; Lahann & Reagan, 2011; Weiner & Compton, 2008), on integration of social classes and races in school (Apple, 2006, 2010), and on the very notion of education as a public good.

Preconceptions of education - how US students are socialized by the hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum consists of those things pupils learn through the experience of attending school rather than the explicitly stated educational objectives of such institutions. They are non-academic, but educationally significant consequences of schooling that occur systematically and include such things as the transmission of norms, values, and beliefs (Giroux & Penna, 1983; Martin, 1983). Two things that my students seem to have learned exquisitely well through the hidden curriculum are the notions of meritocracy and education as a private good. My students come to my classes having learned that one's ability to be successful in school is totally contingent upon one's own hard work, “right” attitude, and high moral character and integrity.

This is the myth of meritocracy - that schools are the location for establishing what one is “made of.” My students have been socialized by their education and culture to not only think that this is how the system should work, but also that it is how the system does work (McNamee & Miller, 2004). Further, my students also come to my classes with a belief in education as a private good. Labaree writes that looking at education as a private good means that one sees “the point of seeking an education is to gain a competitive advantage over other people” (1997, p. 2) and that one should collect credentials as markers of one’s advantages over others. With such beliefs engrained into their views of the world, it is no wonder that my students are so accepting of choice in education. To them, charters, vouchers, magnet schools, and open enrollment are just various means by which any person can work to collect the best credentials possible. To them, these education de/reforms are “fair game” for everyone to get ahead. Through my readings of the hidden curriculum literature, I began to understand that to best teach about education de/reforms, I needed to first challenge students’ deep-seated notions about our society and the role that education plays in reproducing or interrupting the status quo.

Phases 3, 4, and 5 — Postulating Some Teaching Activities, Trying Them, and Observing

As discussed above, my first challenges were to help students a) view education in a broader way than just a private good, and b) begin to understand neoliberal discourse and how it could colonize people’s thinking, especially about public services.

Why send children to school? To attend to this, I came up with the idea of engaging my students in answering the question of “Why do we send children to school?” In the first week of my classes, the students and I discussed and brainstormed the various reasons why we send children to school. Initially, my students tended to be stumped – for this is one of those topics in our society where we think we all know the answer, but then also realize that perhaps we have not truly stopped to think it through at any point in our lives. It’s as if the students tacitly believed that we as a society somehow all agree on the reasons, but then they realized that they have never really heard a full articulation of those reasons. So, I asked my students to do that articulation. I then asked the students to read a chapter from David Labaree’s *How to Succeed in School without Really Learning* (1997) which explores two competing visions of education: 1) education as a public good and 2) education as a private good. Education as a private good tended to be a familiar concept to my students, as discussed earlier. But, they seemed surprised by the notion of education as a public good, or as Labaree (1997) explains it:

the point of education is to provide society with benefits that can be collectively shared...the focus in this case is on the socially useful learning that education can produce rather than on the credentials that the schools distribute [to only some individuals], on enhancing the general welfare rather than on enhancing the advantages of individual educational consumers. (p. 2)

After reading this, some of my students spoke and wrote about how they “never thought of education this way before” and how they have gained a better understanding of why all taxpayers are required to invest in education. After reading Labaree and about various philosophies of education, students began to evidence deepened understandings of how sending children to school serves multiple, and sometimes conflicting, purposes. Students then were able to debate

the overarching assumptions of these many goals. Questions that have arisen in past class discussions include:

- Should public tax monies subsidize private ambitions?
- Why would someone with no children or someone who has completed his/her education be willing to pay taxes to support public school?
- Is education a product, service, or a right?
- Who should influence what is taught in public schools – to whose ends?
- What are the roles of education in a democracy?
- Is the role of education Nation building?
- Is the role of education to create citizens; if so, what does this entail?
- If the purpose of schooling is to create workers, who decides what makes a “good” worker?

We further discussed how, in our current society, the private good or social mobility purpose of education seems to have emerged triumphant over the other possible goals. To illustrate this, I asked my students to conduct a quick experiment. To find out what a random sampling of college students thinks about the purposes of education, I asked the students to go out into the building and approach 2-3 individuals who were either studying, heading to the gym in the building, walking to or from class, etc. to ask “Why are you going to college?” This was a quick activity, which got students out of their seats and adrenaline going to approach some strangers. When they came back to class after about 5-7 minutes, I asked them to list on the board the answers they got from the individuals. Almost invariably, the answers were things like “to get a good job,” “because my parents made me,” “so I can make money later on” and so forth. These responses tended not to surprise the students, as they, only a week ago, were thinking the same things. This activity and the debate over purposes seemed to begin to help students see the juxtaposition of the private good of education (which they have been swimming in for many years) and the public good of education that seems to have been, at least at one point in our history, the primary purpose for developing our education system (Rothstein, 2008).

These discussions of the purposes of education laid the groundwork for discussions of neoliberalism and present-day education de/reforms in that they got students thinking about who benefits from schools and in what ways, and about how those benefits can be quite differential depending on how one is looking at things.

Teaching about neoliberalism in general. Most students have not come across the term neoliberal before this class. Neoliberalism is mostly seen as an academic term that has little to do with the day-to-day beliefs, attitudes and assumptions of average Americans. Thus, the word neoliberalism often sent my students down the wrong brain path. They looked at the root and assumed that it had something to do with left-leaning politics. So in order to help them understand its true meaning, I used a variety of approaches. I asked the students to really look at that root — not for the word liberalism, but for the word liberty, freedom. I also talked about how in recipes, one might see instructions for a “liberal” (open-handed/free) use of salt, or that in older books, like *Pride and Prejudice*, a character, like Mr. Darcy, might be described as “liberal [free, generous] towards the poor.” We then discussed how a “neoliberal” government policy is thus

one where the government is giving freedoms or favors to non-governmental entities (perhaps where they had not existed before) — maybe in the form of de-regulation of industries, lowering of taxes, turning over public assets to private organizations, or setting minimal oversight standards for watching how tax monies are used, and so on. We further discussed what the term tends to mean in the U.S., what its early history was, and how the term has changed from the 1930s to the 1960s and to our current time.

I then moved fairly quickly to concrete examples of how neoliberalism has manifested in our society in the past twenty or so years, showing examples of privatization in such industries as prisons and juvenile corrections, the military, and pharmaceuticals. I shared with my students sections of various videos/websites in which neoliberal policies are prominently discussed – such as Bill Moyers’ “United States of ALEC,” the *Ted Talk* by Nick Hanauer on taxes on the rich, and Tim McCaskill’s vimeo video “Neoliberalism as a Water Balloon,” which beautifully and succinctly shows the effects of neoliberal policies and especially how they related to the economic collapse of 2008. Not only did I discuss these concrete examples during class meetings, but I also frequently utilized class email listservs to share relevant news stories, court cases, research articles, and op-ed pieces dealing with neoliberal policies in the US and worldwide. Students, in turn, began to also share pieces with the whole class.

My initial discussions along with the providing of concrete examples of how neoliberal policies have been implemented, often plunged my students into a surprised awareness of the roots of some of their most-closely held ideas. For example, as discussed earlier, many students held foregone conclusions/unexamined beliefs about certain things in our society and economy — e.g. that competition is always a good, that the private market is always more efficient, cost-effective, quality-oriented, and fair than a government body could ever be, and so on. Such ideas are ubiquitous in our culture and seem to be perceived as mundane, every day, a part of the taken-for-granted in our lives. Students often did not know why they believed the things they did, they just believed them because they have always been there (sort of like fish – do they know they are in water?). When students saw that these ideas were actually part of a broader political and economic philosophy called neoliberalism, they began to develop a language for understanding why their beliefs were as they were, and, more importantly, they began to question their assumptions. We engaged in such questions and problematizing by discussing:

- What is the relationship between competition and quality?
- What does the profit-motive ensure?
- How have and how do corporation behave?
- What do lobbyists do?
- What is the role of state and federal government? And
- Why do we have things like regulations and anti-trust laws?

With this fundamental grounding in the concept of neoliberalism, my classes then typically indicated a readiness to tackle the issue of such policies as they relate to the field of education.

Teaching about neoliberalism in education. As I found with my first round of this research, the number of education de/reforms that are connected to neoliberal concepts is so dauntingly large and complex that it seemed I could never possibly help students to understand

them all. I worried that it all became a hopeless muddle in their minds, so I began a new approach - one that would try to “chunk” the information and connect it to students’ prior knowledge. I began to speak about these de/reforms by using the seemingly simple concept of “choice.” I explored how Americans, particularly, are very enamored with choice and how choice connects to our governmental system (democracy) and our economic system (capitalism). We are a society that loves exercising our choices! And so choice must be an intrinsic good, right? Well, perhaps.

I engaged my students in discussions of how a democratic choice and a consumer choice are not the same thing. A choice that I might make for my breakfast cereal is not equivalent to the choice one makes regarding how public assets might be used. In the former, I have to only think about myself or my family; in the latter, if I am to be a good citizen, I must also consider the needs of others. This discussion of choice then allowed students to probe more deeply into choice systems in education — when a person chooses a charter school for her child, what detriments to the community at large might emerge from this individual-focused decision? In these discussions, we revisited the concepts of education as a private good and education as a public good.

I also engaged the students in discussions on different types of choice schools. For example, when talking about school governance and organization, I had students engage in an activity where they brainstormed types of schools or education venues (public neighborhood, charter, voucher-receiving, magnet, private, military, Quaker, Montessori, tutoring companies, out-of-district schools, etc.). Students were then asked to group the schools along a public-private continuum and discuss what is unique or different about each one. They first had to engage in a discussion of what makes a private school private and what makes a public school public — they discussed funding, oversight, selectivity or openness of enrollment, transparency of governance, and so on. Once students got this big picture view of how different schools (and different policies that allow for the creation of various schools) related to one another as well as related to purposes of education, they were ready to engage in some in-depth, critical research of their own, or so I thought.

Running into trouble. In my teaching, I always try to make very explicit that we are all knowledge producers and that the process of creating knowledge involves the synthesis of various sources and pieces of information combined into a multi-faceted whole/overall conclusion. In my teaching, we frequently discuss how information that comes from various sources must be pulled together, and that sometimes the contradictions between sources are frustrating. For example, when talking about education de/reform practices and policies, my students at times have gotten exasperated at hearing me repeat again and again “it depends.” Are charter schools good or bad? It depends. Where are charter schools? It depends. What regulations cover charter schools? It depends. Who gets to receive vouchers? It depends. How much of a tax credit is given to parents who send their kids to a private school? It depends. Can a family transfer their child to a public school out of their district or must they only choose from schools in the district? It depends. Does an after-school tutoring program have to be in close communication with the school and the families? It depends. I have tried to explain that there is so much that is hugely complicated about all the education de/reforms, and that this is due somewhat to how the federal government/Department of Education has set minimum requirements for policies, but then each state interprets and applies things differently.

To really help illustrate the variety within all these de/reforms, but yet also to draw out some commonalities that we need to be attentive to, I have had students engage in a short-term

mini-research project in which they each mapped a story about the education de/reforms and shared with others during class. To introduce the assignment, I explained again how there are a plethora of organizations/programs connected with school choice/privatization/neoliberal de/reforms. I provided them with a list of such organizations and programs, which includes those connected to school vouchers, such as the McKay Scholarships in FL, the D.C. Opportunity Scholarships, the Cleveland Voucher program, and the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program; those connected to charter schools, including K12 Inc. (which runs online schools – charter and private), Mosaica Education, White Hat Management, Edison Learning/Edison Schools, KIPP, Rocketship Charter Schools, Green Dot Schools, Concept Schools, Imagine Schools, and National Heritage Academies; and those connected to the testing industry, including Pearson Publishing and McGraw-Hill.

I then asked the students to pick one of these listed organizations/programs, do some research on it, and bring to class information on what was found. On the night we discussed their research, I split my class into groups of 4-5 and had them give a round-robin explanation of the sorts of things they found in their research. After they each reported, I asked them to discuss their findings within a particular organizing frame. That frame was made up of the questions found in the first chapter of the *Keeping the Promise: The Debate over Charter Schools* (2008). In this chapter, authors George Wood and the late TheodoreSizer lay out five guiding questions that provide criteria for judging charter schools (and these can be applied to all educational choice/privatization programs as well). Sizer's and Wood's five guiding questions included four that are "linked to the enduring values of our public system of schooling (equity, access, public purpose, and public ownership)," and the fifth was a question about the promise of choice programs "to use freedom from regulation to innovate and show how public schooling can work for all citizens" (p. 8). Thus, I asked the students to look at their research and make a series of summative statements about the organization/program they researched; do they 1) treat all students equitably? 2) provide all families with access to strong schools? 3) help students become lifelong learners and effective citizens of a democracy? 4) provide full transparency and community governance? and 5) get to be free from certain regulations (so they can innovate) and then share their innovations with the wider public schools in the area? Then, in whole group discussion we sought a general classroom consensus on the five questions above. I observed from this activity that students began to be able to construct a coherent story out of a multitude of sources, and share their created knowledge with others in a way that also draws in their philosophical values regarding the purposes of school in a pluralistic society. However, I also found that in their research they were not being very critical consumers of information, and that this was a dangerous thing. For example, some students reported on their chosen topic having only read about one side (e.g. a student gave a glowing report on K12.Inc after only having researched the company's website!). I thus continued my walk on the yellow brick road as I embarked on another round of my research. In this phase, I explored the ways I could possibly help my students develop more critical thinking skills.

Round 3

Phase 1 — Defining the Problem Anew

As stated above, my new quest was to not only help students understand the complexity of educational de/reforms that are happening today, but also to help them become "public

intellectuals" (Giroux, 1988) who can take in information with a critical eye as well as share their understandings with others.

Phase 2 — Seeking More Information/Reflecting

As I began exploring how to develop critical thinking skills, I encountered a very useful book by Thomas Kida (2006) called *Don't Believe Everything You Think*. In this book, Kida explains six basic mistakes humans tend to make in thinking and decision making. I also thought back to a few years ago in one of my classes, when two of my graduate students shared their frustration with how I was approaching teaching the class. The students' comments touched a sensitive nerve with me in that it reminded me of how equally important the development of critical thinking skills was to the teaching of my content and that I needed to be doing more to foster those skills in my courses. These two students were particularly vocal individuals who did not share my professed political views, and they argued that I was only giving them one side of the debate to examine on various issues (and that I always gave the more "liberal" side).

Phases 3-5 — Postulating New Ideas, Trying Them, and Observing Effects

From the above reflections and search for ways to teach critical thinking, I began to make some changes to my approach to the classes. For example, I adopted the *Don't Believe Everything You Think* book as a companion text that we would read one chapter at a time in conjunction with our more content-oriented readings each week. Each chapter depicts a different thinking error we all make (e.g. simplification, pseudo-scientific thinking, seeking to confirm, etc.) and explains steps for how to overcome those errors. I began to ask the students to apply what they learned in a Kida chapter to the content readings that they did for a given week (e.g. does the chapter on the role of chance and coincidence have any connections to readings which critique standardized testing and NCLB?).

I have also developed a number of critical interrogation approaches/activities to help my students strengthen their critical thinking skills; these include a more nuanced explanation of the mini-research process, VOODLing, cui bono/paranoid readings, and dialogue poems.

Regarding the mini-research process that I described earlier, I began to tell students that I was hoping they would look for both good and bad info about these programs/organizations. (e.g. what the organizations say about themselves; what others say about them, good and bad; research done on them, scandals, success stories, etc.). I explained the importance of them understanding that an initial Google Scholar or web search is fine, but that they need to be sure to know that what comes up on such searches are not random and that companies and organizations pay to be higher up on the search results and searches even vary per machine. I encouraged them to use search terms such as "critiques of" or "opponents of" in order to find more rich information. Since making this change to the assignment explanation, I have noticed much higher quality reviews of a given charter chain or voucher plan. Students have seemed more skeptical when reading the websites of these organizations and programs and more willing to consider alternative viewpoints.

In response to the criticisms of turning my students into parrots of me, detailed above, the semester following receiving the criticism I developed an assignment called "VOODL – Voice of Opposition Discussion Leader." My instructions tell my students that:

Every day you are expected to participate in small and whole group settings in class. On days that you are VOODL, your voice and involvement should be VERY prominent – you should clearly come across as a leader and voice of criticality/opposition to the readings we did on those days (in some cases, you may not truly oppose the authors, but you just act as a devil’s advocate). You are to prepare some particular items that you will then use in your role as VOODL, including the following:

- Discussion questions for each of the readings
- Critical analysis and opposition arguments and resources – find alternate views to what these authors are arguing this week. For example, if the authors are advocating a particular position, what holes could you punch in their arguments? Do they make any factual errors? Are there ways you can pick apart the author’s argument? Do a bit of outside research for a video clip or a short article or blog post that argues the opposite viewpoints and bring the ideas found in them to class to share (if a video clip is especially compelling, send to me before class and I may show to all). You may personally agree with what my authors are saying, but the purpose of this VOODL role is to demonstrate the critical thinking skill of seeing multiple sides to a given argument.

During class, the VOODLs for the day become the small and whole group leaders for discussion. Though sometimes quite challenging, students have seemed to enjoy having the “blessing” of the classroom authority figure (the professor) giving them explicit permission to really take the authors’ and my viewpoints to task. Some students have really gotten into the role and personified a counter-author or other fictional or real opponent to the author. For example, in class one night when we were speaking about tuition tax credits, one of the VOODLs chose to role play a parent of privately-educated children and brought up the viewpoint of many such parents that they are “paying for their child’s school twice – once through taxes, and second through tuition.” Another time, we were reading Dan Dimaggio’s (2010) piece entitled “The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Test Scorer” in which the author detailed being employed by Pearson as a standardized test scorer of exams written by students in the public schools. In this article, the author lamented the piece-work nature of the job and how he was expected to score each essay in about one minute as well as make sure his scores conformed to psychometricians’ expectations about the score distribution. In response to this anti-testing reading, a VOODL brought up, from the opposing perspective, that at least jobs are being created through such de/reforms. The raising of such points as these helped us all get deeper into the material, examine things from multiple stakeholder viewpoints, and consider by what criteria and values we make decisions for our society. And through all this, because of the “permission” this assignment made explicit to having debate in class, we were still able to maintain a friendly, positive climate of thoughtful discussion.

Another approach I have adopted to help strengthen my students’ critical thinking skills is *cui bono*/paranoid readings. “Paranoid reading” or “the hermeneutics of suspicion” are all about reading something with an eye toward the uncovering of systemic or institutionalized oppressions (Stern, 2012). While I have not used this terminology in class, I have aimed to have students become people who look at educational policies with suspicious minds. I want them to ask “*cui bono*?” (who benefits?) about every new educational idea that comes to their awareness. I have

assigned students to read things such as *Fertilizers, Pills, and Magnetic Strips* by the author Gene Glass (2008) and his newer book with David Berliner *50 Myths and Lies that Threaten America's Public Schools* (2014), who model this stance and show how, as a public, we too often ask only certain questions about reforms (e.g. “do charter schools work,” “will they improve student academic achievement?” or “what does it cost”), and that we rarely ask the more important questions of “why this proposal and not others?” and “who is proposing this reform and why?” and “who wins and who loses if we go down this path?” On a weekly basis, I have assigned students to reflect in writing on what they read and a) provide evidence that they understand what the authors are arguing for or against; b) provide counter-arguments; c) make connections to their lives (e.g. how does the reading connect to or contradict their own experiences?); and d) pose discussion questions they want to raise in class about these readings. Since beginning these practices, students have frequently laughed when I mention their “favorite Latin question” — *cui bono?*— because I repeat it so often; however, this repetition seems to have had an effect as many students have mentioned in their course evaluations how much their eyes have been opened to looking for motivations of various players in education policy.

A final critical interrogation of education de/reforms approach I have taken in my courses is that of asking groups of students to write dialogue poems in class and share them with one another (Fleischman, 2007). I was first introduced to dialogue poems in *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, which I use as one of the texts for my classes. Such poems are written from two perspectives (often opposing, but not necessarily). They are meant to be read by two people, with one person reading one side and the other person the other side. Occasionally, they will read certain lines in unison (because at times, the two viewpoints may be in agreement). This past semester, students wrote some amazing dialogue poems in my class about the whole neoliberal/privatization movement in general. Table 1 below is a compilation of various groups’ poems which deeply illustrated to me that these students really “got” the concepts I was trying to teach and which I have explicated above:

Table 1: Compilation of Groups' Dialogue Poems

<p>We need to improve our schools:</p> <p>Promote equality,</p> <p>Value diversity,</p> <p>It’s the American way.</p> <p>Vouchers contribute to our classist society. We prefer an equitable system.</p> <p>And whose fault is that?</p>	<p>We need to improve our schools:</p> <p>Foster competition,</p> <p>Give vouchers,</p> <p>Give choices—</p> <p>It’s the American way.</p> <p>Public schools create an overall mediocre society.</p> <p>And whose fault is that?</p>
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<p>We believe in our teachers; they are capable and do not exploit our students</p> <p>Privatizers step <u>on</u> students: rushing them through content, teaching them in military-like settings, exposing them to excessive advertisements in schools</p> <p>Our methods work...we create</p> <p>people who are well-rounded, critical-thinking citizens who have compassion and tolerance for others.</p> <p>We have the best plan for education...We're the solution!</p>	<p>It's those lazy teachers!</p> <p>We step in when teachers fail.</p> <p>Our methods workwe create people who will be better workers and competitors</p> <p>We have the best plan for education...We're the solution!</p>
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Conclusion

As detailed in the article above, I have been on a search for ways to introduce my students to the concepts of and issues surrounding educational privatization and market-based de/reforms in America's public school context. This has been a difficult journey because these reform ideas are incredibly complex and, at times, internally contradictory. For example, while many of them purport to eradicate race and class-based educational differences for K-12 students, at times these reforms actually result in the re-intensification of these inequities. This complexity makes teaching about these concepts exceptionally difficult and fraught with paradox. Another level of this difficulty is attempting to present the information in a way that does not feel to students that they are being indoctrinated by another one of those "wildly liberal ivory tower dwellers" (a.k.a. college professors). Understanding my students' contexts and views of the world and coupling that with activities that develop critical thinking skills has been one way that I have felt successful in working through these complexities.

Cowering in a cyclone cellar away from in-depth analysis of education de/reforms would only result in a simplistic, black and white portrayal of vitally important and influential knowledge. My path on this yellow brick road of self-study has illustrated that fact to me quite clearly. My students need and deserve the richer, more fully fleshed-out Technicolor version I have detailed above in order to truly develop their brains, broaden their hearts, and build the courage needed to fully live in the public schools of today.

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